

Signs of a new strike wave in China

John Chan
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Over the past month, a series of strikes has taken place in China. While these disputes are still small and isolated, they signal a profound shift. The entry of the working class internationally into struggle during 2011—starting with uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt and spreading to Europe and the protest movement in the US state of Wisconsin—is starting to find its reflection in China.

Just as millions of workers in Europe and America are confronting austerity and rising unemployment, so the decline in their living standards has been translated into a loss of export orders in China. In turn, sweatshop owners in China, faced with shrinking profit margins, are passing the burden onto workers, provoking the latest industrial unrest.

Strikes have rocked export factories in the Pearl River Delta of Guangdong province. Some 7,000 workers at the Yue Cheng shoe plant struck on November 17 to defend jobs against the company's plan to move inland where labour is cheaper. They were joined by hundreds more workers at Top Form, a major underwear maker, and 1,000 workers at a Taiwanese-owned computer accessories plant. In both cases the protests were against excessive hours and low pay.

More recently, at Shenzhen Hailiang Storage Products, 4,500 workers have been on strike since Sunday to defend jobs and conditions, as the plant is to be sold to the American-owned hard-drive manufacturer Western Digital. As with other stoppages, Chinese authorities have responded with police-state measures, dispatching riot police to deal with 2,000 workers who occupied the factory.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime is acutely aware that the industrial unrest is different from the wave of strikes over wages that began last year at a Honda auto plant. The latest strikes are not for higher pay, but to defend existing jobs and conditions as employers slash costs on every front and push for longer hours and unpaid overtime.

Concerns have already been expressed that job losses

could be as severe as in 2008, when 23 million Chinese workers lost their jobs. Li Qiang, the director of the US-based *China Labour Watch*, recently warned: "Massive factory layoffs will lead to increased protests and social turmoil in China's urban and rural areas, spurred on especially by those laid-off factory workers and other migrant labourers particularly marginalised by society."

What Beijing fears most is coordinated action by workers, such as that taken last month by thousands of PepsiCo workers in a joint protest organised via the Internet across five provinces against a planned merger and job losses. Caught unawares, Beijing subsequently ordered its Internet police to block the word "PepsiCo strike" from micro-blogging services.

The prospect of broad unrest prompted Zhou Yongkang, the CCP's top state security official, to warn this week that all levels of government had to urgently establish a "social management system"—code words for police-state measures—"especially when facing negative effects of the market economy."

The CCP bureaucracy is still haunted by the last revolutionary crisis in China—mass protests in 1989 by workers and students in Beijing's Tiananmen Square and other Chinese cities. The regime had to deploy tanks and tens of thousands of soldiers to crush what was an emerging rebellion by the working class against the devastating impact of capitalist restoration on living standards.

The massive expansion of Chinese capitalism over the past two decades has only heightened social tensions. As China has become the sweatshop of world capitalism, the working class has vastly expanded to an estimated 400 million. The peasantry, which was not involved in the 1989 protests, is now intimately connected to the cities via millions of rural migrant workers.

The Stalinist regime cannot rely on the state-run unions to contain a restive working class. The All China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) functions directly on behalf of the government and companies in policing employees. No worker looks to this organisation for

support when taking strike action.

During the recent PepsiCo strikes, for instance, workers elected their own representatives and held their own general meetings to guide the struggle. After a November 30 deal failed to satisfy them, the Lanzhou bottling plant workers decided to continue their protest.

Many workers, however, harbour illusions that independent unions, as advocated by Hong Kong-based *China Labour Bulletin* director Han Dongfang, offer a means of fighting for their interests. The aim of Han, a workers' leader during the 1989 protests, is explicitly to “depoliticise” any strike movement—in other words, to prevent any political challenge to the Stalinist regime and to confine workers to demands for limited, piecemeal reforms.

Like their counterparts around the world, workers in China confront a concerted assault on their jobs and living standards. In China, that offensive is directed by the CCP government, which, despite its occasional socialist phrasemongering, acts in the interests of the corporate elite.

The political lesson of this year's militant protests in the Middle East, Europe and the US is that the working class can defend its interests only through a revolutionary struggle for a workers' government to carry out a socialist transformation of the society. Because of the transnational character of modern production, there is an objective necessity for Chinese workers to unify with their class brothers and sisters internationally to fight the same global corporations.

Above all, what is needed is a genuine Marxist party based on the lessons of the protracted political fight waged by the international Trotskyist movement against the betrayals of Stalinism and Maoism. That means building a Chinese section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

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